Eye Music: More than Meets the Eye
Breaking the Linguistic Boundary Through ASL, Poetry and Performance

By Reuben Barback

Peter Cook became Deaf when he was 13 years old, enduring all of his adolescence without learning American Sign Language (ASL) until he was 19. For the first time in his life, Cook felt he had a language, and was able to communicate with those who could understand him. ASL poet Karen Christie feels similarly.

"I was tempted to revisit the many metaphors Deaf folks use when describing finally being exposed to ASL," Christie wrote via email. "The most apt is related to finally coming home for the first time, fully feeling one's self... having a cool feeling satisfied or having a thirst quenched, reaching a self-knowing."

Christie and ASL poet Patrick Graybill introduced the Eye Music performance as opening acts for Cook and Kesiya Lorenz, known as the Flying Words Project. With the exception of Lorenz, every ASL artist who performed in Deaf UC Santa Cruz music professor Larry Polansky was a professor at the UC. With initial support from the Porte Hitchcock Poetry Fund, the Eye Music festival reached fruition two years in the making. Polansky continued to gather support from other USC programs, such as the Arts Dean's Fund for Excellence.

Prior to teaching at USC, Polansky was a professor at Dartmouth University, where he taught a class about Deaf culture. He focused on the medium of ASL poetry and performance. Lectures included guest performances by well-known ASL poets, such as Graybill.

"Larry sees ASL, like it's music," Graybill said in ASL, through an interpreter. "After working with him at Dartmouth, I was very impressed with his enthusiasm and his belief in ASL."

Considering Polansky and Graybill's previous collaborations, it seemed only fitting to bring Graybill to USC to share his passion for ASL poetry with the Santa Cruz community along with Christie, Cook and Lorenz.

ASL poetry consists of five specific indicators for performance. These include hand shape, location of the sign, palm orientation, movement of the sign, and non-manual communication. Facial expression is one example of a non-manual marker, which Cook implements in his poetry.

Cook performed the political poem "Made in the USA" during which he criticized the ideas that most of our clothing is made in China. Through expressive hand and facial expression, Cook created the story of a seamstress drenched in sweat while making clothes in a factory that never stops running.

"Clothing" which involves borrowing vocabulary from English to represent ASL signs, is another device in ASL poetry. In contrast, "fingerspelling" involves translating English into signs without incorporating ASL, which often leads to spelling out whole words with the use of the fingers.

"Fingerspelling is a conduit in what I would call hegemonic language," Polansky said. "The split between the hearing community and the Deaf community is very severe. There is no casual bilingualism.

"This linguistic barrier can often make it difficult to translate ASL poetry into English. The main problem is ASL and English use two completely different languages, derived from certain structural elements that cause most words or gestures to be lost in translation."

"Developing any poetry is impossible, and translating ASL to English is doubly impossible," Polansky said. "I don't see any virtue in not doing it, as long as we have the original poetry. The harm is only done to the receiver. There is no violence done to the poetry."

ASL goes poets like Patrick Graybill and Peter Cook the opportunity to convey multiple meanings through two simultaneous hand gestures, something those of the hearing community cannot accomplish through speech. To Graybill's poem "Reflection," he physically plays with the title of the poem. One hand conveys the hand shape for reflection, while the other hand, placed below, visually creates a reflection of the other hand.

"I consider this in to be Deaf gain, rather than hearing loss," Graybill said.

Although Graybill was excited to expose ASL poetry to USC students, he also expressed his interest in bringing together members of the Deaf community in Santa Cruz up to campus.

"It's good for the Deaf community to realize we don't have to stay hidden,", Graybill said. "We can have an open dialogue and communication about all of this (as we can), learn more about each other."

One of the most memorable moments of this performance was when Cook and Lorenz asked the audience to participate in retelling the "Evolution of Man" through ASL. Audience members were divided into sections in which they had to act out the moment of the Big Bang — fish swimming in the ocean, lizards walking on dry land and people transforming into humans.

Until finally, Man arrived, proceeding to hop after hopping from a beer can, only to eject those beer particles back into the air, joining

with the same state that formed the Big Bang. This festival acknowledges the sense of community we all have together with one another, working together to create this 'invisible divide' between the Deaf and hearing communities.

"There's a common connection between us, Peter and Patrick," music professor Polansky said. "We're tall artists."

Polansky further reiterated the importance of ASL, for not only the Deaf and hearing communities in Santa Cruz, but also the impact it should have on our country at large.

"ASL is an American language. It's an American art form," Polansky said. "These are great artists, but they have a very limited audience, primarily because of a linguistic boundary. The more people who make the effort to communicate with the (Deaf) community, the better off everybody would be."